BD
541
B7

BD
541
.B7

Bosanquet

The Meaning of Teology

BD
541
.B7
1906
IMS

The Institute of Mediaeval Studies
LIBRARY
Toronto, Ontario

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/meaningofteleolo00bosauoft

THE BRITISH ACADEMY

H. Corr, C.L.B.

The Meaning of Teleology

By

B. Bosanquet

Fellow of the Academy

[*From the Proceedings of the British Academy, Vol. II*]

London

Published for the British Academy
By Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press Warehouse
Amen Corner, E.C.

Price One Shilling net

THE INSTITUTE OF MEDIAEVAL STUDIES
ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE
LIBRARY

FEB 23 1937

9291

THE MEANING OF TELEOLOGY

By B. BOSANQUET

Fellow of the Academy

Read April 30, 1906

1. The point of principle to which I desire to call attention lies in the position adopted by more than one distinguished critic of Naturalism in maintaining the claims of Teleology against Mechanism and Epiphenomenalism. As I understand the matter, they rightly reject the analysis of the universe as a homogeneous system of quantity, the nature of the units in which can hardly be further defined. But if my understanding is correct in following them beyond this point, they rest the case of teleology within the universe exclusively on the capacity of finite consciousness for guidance and selection. They deny, as I gather, in principle that the supreme individuality, whose reality they are concerned to maintain, can manifest itself as plan and purpose through a nature which is the complement of mind, and by the operation of which the immanent idea can be conveyed to and moulded within the finite intelligence through processes which to that intelligence must appear as necessity, and even as mechanical necessity. If I read the tendency right, the reaction against mechanism is going near to destroy the idea of the reign of law, and to enthrone the finite subject as the guide and master of nature and history. If this is rightly read, I think we shall have to recall the mechanist, along with Spinoza, in the interests of the philosophy of history, and the theory of religion.

The view in which I find a difficulty seems to be present in two degrees. Either the realm of finite consciousness is taken to be coextensive with the organic kingdom, and to be responsible for introducing, along with life, a principle of guidance and construction unknown to the inorganic world, and accounting wholly and essentially for the teleological element in evolution and in history. Or again, the realm of finite consciousness is extended throughout the inorganic world itself, not merely as a possibility of fact, but as a means of accounting for the manifestation of design or harmony in actual nature through reactions which are falsely taken to be mechanical.

The distribution of mentality through the creation is a mere question of fact; but I am certain that no appeal to it can release us from the necessity of assuming a determinate outward side which characterizes the mind or will of separate beings, or can account for definite characteristics of the world from the subjective aspect alone.

In both these cases it looks to me as if an error of fundamental principle had been committed. I do not doubt that anything which ultimately can *be*, must be of the nature of mind or experience, and therefore that reality must ultimately be conceived in this manner. But to pass from this ultimate conviction to the idea that finite minds are the sole vehicles and determinants of teleology, apart from 'a nature'—a relatively external and mechanical system by which their content is defined and their individuality is moulded,—this seems to me as serious an error as that of the mechanistic view itself. And I shall try to show that the misconception is deep-rooted in the double meaning of the term teleology.

2. I will state this point at once. It is admitted, I think, in principle, that teleology is an unlucky term. In the sense of aiming at the unfulfilled it gives an unreal importance to time, and to the part—it may be a relatively trivial part—which happens to come last in succession. Of the two implications of the term 'end'—completeness and conclusion—the latter, which is an accessory, usurps precedence over the former, which is fundamental. But in truth significance does not depend on what comes first or last, but on what there is in the individual real when it is apprehended in its completeness. Action is not truly teleological because in the time-process some deferred element of a partly given totality bids fair to be carried out through the desire of a finite consciousness. The end, in this sense, though *ex hypothesi* a *sine qua non* of the whole, would not necessarily be the main constituent of teleological value. The question of value would be independent of temporal relations, and would depend on the structure and significance of the whole in course of completion; that is, on its relation to the ultimate whole or individuality. The notion that the ideal belongs to the future is the enemy of all sane idealism; the ideal is what we can see of the whole, and the way in which it shapes the future for us is only an incident of our reading of past and present in their unity. Thus when 'purpose' merely means the fact that some finite consciousness is urged by some unfulfilled idea, there is in this, apart from the content of the idea, nothing specially sacred or significant. It is vain to look to the bare fact of conscious purpose for the essence or significance of teleology. Purpose only means, prima facie, that some one wants something. But,

omitting all other difficulties, does the something lose its value when he gets it? Does everything, then, derive its value from want? Is nothing good in itself, or as a fulfilled purpose? Surely we must take account of fruition and the character of perfection. An intuitive intelligence itself could only create a world in accordance with what that world must be and the laws by which its content is continuous and coherent. Things are not teleological because they are *de facto* purposed, but are necessary to be purposed because they are teleological. When we speak of the ultimate real as teleological or as individual, it is hazardous to say that purpose, in the sense of a craving unfulfilled in time, can play any part in our conception. Teleology which depends on a feature of the time-process is not a teleology which any one but a pragmatist can affirm of ultimate reality, and the lesson thus suggested is only enforced when we come to ask ourselves what is the true test, even for finite life, or for morals, of the purposiveness of a purpose. Subjective selection is very poor work, except in as far as it becomes more than subjective. Objectiveness of selection is the test of true purposiveness.

3. When this implication of teleology is reduced to its true level, we can go a step further as regards the relation of teleology to a mechanical system in the sense of a system governed by universal law. We may start from Lotze:—

> The Absolute is no magician; it does not produce Things in appropriate places out of a sheer vacuum, merely because they correspond to the purport of its plan. All particular cases of its operation are based on a system of management according to law, adapted to its operation as a whole. But I must repeat: it is not here as it is with man, who cannot do otherwise; rather this uniformity with general principles is itself a part of what is designed to exist. Hence it is, that each stage in the development of organic life seems to arise step by step out of the reactions which are made necessary for the combined elements by their persistent nature; nor is there anywhere an exception to the dependence of Life on mechanical causes.

Starting from this view of mechanism, as thus suggested by Lotze[1], we may go on to suggest that his reservation ('it is not here as it is with man') seems untenable in principle. The popular distinction between a unique teleological whole or individuality, and groupings of similar points governed by a 'law' or rule of general application, possessed, we must believe, an undue importance for his mind.

It seems clear that a universal law does not, in its nature, imply a plurality of undifferentiated points of application—which is strictly a contradiction in terms—and that, on the contrary, every difference which can be instrumental within a whole to the realization of

[1] *Metaph.*, sect. 233, 277, and Introd. x, E. Tr.

teleology or individuality must inevitably constitute a term in a system of universal laws. For every true determination is true eternally, and so is universal in its inmost application; and in an individual whole the correlation of every difference with all others and with the whole itself must necessarily give rise to a system of true determinations [1], which are apt to be held distinct from universal laws only because of the current confusion between the universal and the general, which Lotze, perhaps, did not wholly escape [2].

A whole, whose differences had no nature—no identity—of their own [3], could not be intrinsically connected with them. For how can something be connected with nothing? Indeed, one does not see how the whole itself, being constituted by such differences, could be anything real or self-subsistent. If the predications which express the differences have no kinship with eternal truth, the whole can have no kinship with reality. Suppose, for example, that, charged with the execution of any plan or purpose, there were elements of miraculous capacities, to which nothing was forbidden in the way of transformation, self-annihilation, or new creation. Is it not plain that the content of the plan to be executed would require them either to define themselves and so cast off their omnipotence *ad hoc*, or to act as the hidden substratum out of which other elements, continuous and determinate *ad hoc*, should be generated in order to conform with the rational demands and context of the plan? Why continuous, it may be asked? why may not the plan demand transformation or re-creation of individual elements without ground as without limit? The answer is, as it seems to me, that plan involves determinateness, and determinateness continuity, and that in all directions. Everything must be followed by something—must be continued by something on every side, and between any two somethings within a unity there must be a determinate interconnexion, prescribed by the content of that unity. Miracle is incompatible with plan. I repeat; the consideration that every such interconnexion might be conceived as unique, the repetition of it being excluded by the individuality of the whole, does not in any way militate against its character of a universal law. On the contrary, such uniqueness is the true character of all

[1] Any rejoinder based on the supra-relational nature of the Absolute as such would, it seems to me, be irrelevant here. We are treating of a world in which teleological wholes and universal laws are supposed to be necessary alternatives, and I am only attempting to show that they are not alternatives but complementary aspects of reality, so far as appearing in such a world.

[2] See Introd. x.

[3] I do not say a nature other than relative to the whole; but in order to be relative it must *be*.

that is universal, a character which the commonplace conception of abstract generalization tends to obscure.

4. The problem may be developed by considering the relation of two positions respecting the nature of mechanism whose compatibility has been denied. The position (*a*) that nature is instrumental to the development of that which is of spiritual value is incompatible, it has been urged, with the position (*b*) that the spiritual view is that which regards experience as a mechanically intelligible whole.

For, it is argued, the character of being 'mechanical' must either *ex vi termini* drop out the element of spiritual significance, or must at best refer to the analogy of actual machines; in which latter case, it is argued, the view criticized would involve taking the world to be intelligible as a true machine is intelligible. Now it is further urged that no true machine is a whole at all; it is a subordinate instrument in the execution of purposes imposed on it from without, requiring purposive action from without both to set it at work and to regulate its behaviour. In a word, whatever is a true machine, just because it is such, must be thought of as interacting, and that on terms of inferiority, with something which is not a machine.

The suggestion that *ex vi termini* mechanical intelligibility drops out all spiritual significance, is the precise position which I am here concerned to deny. It consists in the definition of mechanical by the exclusion of spiritual, a definition which at once, and necessarily, makes the spiritual as well as the mechanical partial and finite. How can it be said that there is nothing spiritual in the mechanical explanation of an arch or a tower? Would they be more spiritual if they had been magically created by 'The words that cleft Eildon Hills in three And bridled the Tweed with a curb of stone'? Surely, far less. The penetration by the law of all things, which is just the essence of spiritual inwardness, as of mechanical explanation, would then be wanting.

The second alternative put by the criticism makes the matter more obvious. A machine, we are told, essentially needs to be supplemented by purposive action, conveying purpose to it from without; outside its processes, in time, to set it at work, and acting on it 'from without,' i. e. externally to its explicable system, by way of regulating it.

Now this is not merely saying that a mechanical way of understanding is an inadequate way of understanding, in as far as it imperfectly represents the whole of purpose or individuality. It lays down a certain interpretation of this inadequacy; and this interpretation seems to be crude and erroneous. It depends on extending

the analogy of the supposed[1] relation of a clock or an engine to human purposes conveyed through human hands, to the whole mechanical appearance of the universe as compared with its purposive aspect. But it is obvious that here we have a *petitio principii*. The question is as to the mechanical appearance of the universe; and the human body, as interacting with things in space, is prima facie absolutely within this appearance; the question of interaction with a purposive being cannot possibly arise at the point where the hand touches the machine. At that point there is nothing which is not most strictly mechanical. We have no experience nor know any appearance of any machine interacting with anything which in the interaction is not also a machine. Such interaction may be a deeper interpretation of appearances; but you cannot find it as a fact in the case of any bodily process. It is most remarkable that this simple truth is constantly forgotten. Thus, for example, in dealing with the utterance of mind through the fine arts, we constantly speak as if 'expression' came somehow straight from the soul, while mechanical finish was something different in kind. But in truth, of course, both are prima facie alike mechanical, and expression must mean a fuller mechanical control over the medium than what is termed *par excellence* mechanical execution. Mind and individuality, so far as finite, find their fullest expression as aspects of very complex and precisely determined mechanical systems. This is the law, I believe wholly without exception, for every higher product of human soul and intelligence, and also of cosmic evolution. The mechanical appearance must be granted to be universal and unbroken, though we may suppose it to depend on the nature of a system in which individuality is manifested through universal law. Having now, after the argument of section 2, no need to restrict teleology to the realm of finite purpose, we can freely suppose the world-plan to be immanent in the whole, including finite mind and also mechanical nature, the obviously secondary and fragmentary being of the former constituting a partial revelation of the meaning of things, but by no means its principal vehicle or the sole organ of guidance in evolution or in history. The point here maintained against the critic depends on the continuity of mechanism with the individuality of the real, in virtue of that deeper aspect of the latter, which is logical rather than teleological. This is why, admitting a certain inadequacy in the mechanical view as commonly understood, we still contend that the true spiritual ideal demands mechanical intelligibility.

[1] 'Supposed,' because the relation of mechanism to intelligence is the point at issue.

5. We may now approach a positive result and first take for illustration the case of a beautiful flower. Our view excludes two extremes. On the one hand, it is ridiculous to say that such a product arises by accident, that is, as a by-product of the interaction of elements in whose nature and general laws of combination no such result is immanent; as if in some way these were simpler substances and laws more real and fundamental in the universe, and as though we were dealing with the insight of a human workman, by which the more complex developments were not anticipated or reckoned for. It is impossible in this way to treat part of the world as primary and part as a secondary superstructure. We must interpret the nature of nature as much by the flower as by the law of gravitation. If we come to that, there are appearances, which we cannot on any sound principle refuse to call teleological, in the most direct and simple reactions of mechanism. The motions of the solar system, the curl of a wave, the form of a precipice, are appearances deeply rooted in the simplest physical data, and yet, for all we can see, as well meriting teleological interest, as anything else in the works of God or of man.

On the other hand, we must not say that 'purpose is active' in the flower, if that is to mean that we ascribe it to an end or idea, somehow superinduced upon the routine course of the elements by a power comparable to finite consciousness, operating, as it were, in a vacuum. If the former spelt 'accident,' this spells 'miracle.'

We have seen that teleology is destroyed if no determinate relations between the differences of the unity can be truly predicated. As Lotze has told us, you can find no point at which life is not mechanically conditioned. Thus the beautiful individuality of the flower really forces on us a conclusion which goes so far that the case of human consciousness, though appearing so widely different in degree, can hardly carry us further in principle. Avoiding the two extremes just pointed out, we are driven to affirm that in the structure and being of the flower the common natural elements behave according to their different relations, and that the wonderful creation we behold is simply the immanent development of certain factors which, no doubt, in their isolation, seem far enough removed from anything of the kind. We have, indeed, to bear in mind that the environment—the objective selection of the world—has been active; it is not in a few 'elements' as laid side by side in the laboratory, but only in the whole interactions of nature, that the plan of the flower has been immanent. Still our wonder remains; for, granting that we are not bound to deduce the flower directly from the inorganic elements, yet at any moment such a material substance

as the seed of a plant must be said to contain[1] an individuality shut up in a strictly mechanical arrangement. I venture to urge that here we are not relying on any point which can be disputed on metaphysical ground; we are not attempting to show that or how Nature aims at ends; we are insisting on what seems to us a pure matter of fact, viz. that in a seed or in a flower you have a wonderful thing, a thing decisively partaking of individuality, definitely and plainly constituted[2] by arrangements of material substances and their reactions according to law. In this case the suggestion of miraculous intervention of a finite consciousness, which would meet us when we appeal to the embodiment of mind in artificial machines or in works of aesthetic expression, would hardly find an advocate. We know, roughly speaking, the history of flower development, about as well as we know that of any natural process whatever. And moreover, any such suggestion has in my view been wholly put out of court by the examination to which we have subjected the correlative conceptions of mechanism and teleology. The idea that when a man constructs a clock, or composes a sonata, you have a purposive intelligence operating by the bare form of design on a system which thus receives something that cannot be communicated by the reaction of mechanical parts on one another, should now appear to be a contradiction in terms. No one would think, to-day, of accounting for the flower by an explanation of that kind—say, by the purposive interposition of a creative intelligence, and whether or no Nature can aim at ends, it is mere fact that she can present them to our minds.

Thus we have partly seen, and we may now further see, that the foundations of teleology in the universe are far too deeply laid to be accounted for by, still less restricted to, the intervention of finite consciousness. Everything goes to show that such consciousness should not be regarded as the source of teleology, but as itself a manifestation, falling within wider manifestations, of the immanent individuality of the real. It is not teleological because, as a finite subject of desire and volition, it is 'purposive.' It is what we call 'purposive' because reality is individual and teleological, and manifests this character partly in finite intelligence, partly in appearances

[1] The further conditions here—those which are necessary to the flower but cannot change it into anything else—must in fairness be treated as conditions only.

[2] Of course the percipient consciousness has to be allowed for, and for ultimate significance this is important. But for the question how grades of appearances are connected with each other, which I am now discussing, the percipient consciousness, being a common factor throughout, ought, as it seems to me, to be dismissed.

of a far greater range and scope. The large-scale patterns of history and civilization are not to be found as purposes within any single finite consciousness; the definite continuity and correlation of particular intelligent activities, on which the teleological character of human life ultimately depends—the 'ways of Providence'—are a fact on the whole of the same order as the development of the solar system or the appearance of life upon the surface of the earth. It is impossible to attribute to finite consciousness the whole development which springs from the linked action of separate and successive finite consciousnesses in view of the environment. Every step, though in itself intelligent, is in relation to the whole unconscious; and the result is a 'nature,' though a second and higher nature. This principle is all important, and holds throughout all levels of being. I am content to stake my whole contention upon it, and if it can be overthrown, or if I have misconceived the attitude of anti-naturalist writers to it, I shall be most eager to be set right. Man's intelligence, as I understand the matter, presupposes and does not on the whole sustain, his bodily life. To say that all vital responses have been inherited from volitional or quasi-volitional behaviour is to my mind doubtful in fact, but in any case an evasion of the point of principle. In the first place, if something analogous to volition moulded the structures of our body in earlier phases of life, it never moulded them by any conscious wisdom of its own; it followed, almost blindly, the determinings of a deeper wisdom, which lay hidden in the general structure of the environment. The denial of teleological significance to natural selection is typical of the contention which I am arguing against.

In the second place, whatever mind may have done in the past for our bodily structures and responses, this cannot come into court when we ask what part it plays to-day. Man's mind and purposes presuppose, accept, and are founded on his actual body; the plant mind, if there be one, presupposes and accepts the plant-form. Say here, as was said of man, that mind is present from the beginning; still it is present in forms so elementary that they must, on the whole, be moulded rather than mould. The orchid could have no mind that could contrive its fertilization, any more than man has a mind which could teach him to swallow or to digest, or could choose the place or century of his birth.

Everywhere finite consciousness makes its appearance, so far as this is obvious and unmistakable, at a relatively high level, focussing and revealing the significance of a huge complication of mute history and circumstances behind it and surrounding it. If ambiguous in bio-

logical evolution, where the facts are hard to know and interpret, the principle is clear and unambiguous in history. It is not finite consciousness that has planned the great phases of civilization, which are achieved by the linking together of the achievements of finite consciousnesses. Each separate intelligence reaches but a very little way, and relatively to the whole of a movement must count as unconscious. You may say there is intelligence in every step of the connexion ; but you cannot claim as a design of finite intelligence what never presented itself in that character to any single mind. The leader of a Greek colony to Ionia in the eighth or ninth century B.C. was certainly paving the way for Christianity ; but his relation to it, though much more in degree, was not essentially different in kind from that of a coral insect to a coral reef. Christianity and the coral reef alike were never any design of men or of insects ; they lay deeper in the roots of things, and this, as I hold, really carries with it the question of principle about evolution. Nothing is properly due to mind, which never was a plan before a mind.

The contrast, then, of mechanism with teleology, is not to be treated as if elucidated at one blow by the antithesis of purposive consciousness, and the reactions of part on part. It is rooted in the very nature of totality, which it regards from two complementary points of view, as an individual whole, and as constituted of inter-reacting members. Of the two points of view, it is impossible for either to be entirely absent. Assuming this impossibility to be possible, a total failure of mechanical intelligibility would reduce the spiritual to the miraculous, and destroy teleology, as a total failure of teleological intelligibility would reduce individuality to incoherence, and annihilate mechanism. But teleology, being usually thought of *par excellence* or in abstraction, may more easily be supposed absent than mechanism, which must attend any inter-relation at all. 'Understanding without reason is something, reason without understanding is nothing.'

The entire doctrine of theism in the Kantian sense as involving a personal creator and governor of the world, and with it the paramount importance of subjective selection and bare finite consciousness as causes in the universe, in contrast with natural selection and the immanent plan of things—is here called in question, though another and a deeper importance might attach itself, as has been indicated, to finite consciousness from a wholly different point of view. The meeting of extremes in metaphysics is not a thing that should surprise us; and the polemic against the mechanical view of the universe and the epiphenomenal doctrine of intelligence may

find these conceptions falling back upon an alliance unexpected alike to themselves and to their antagonist. In these suggestions, we are entirely discarding the actual context and contentions of recent psychological epiphenomenalism. But the name 'epiphenomenalism' seems to suggest a significance which has not usually been given it. I do not mean to treat consciousness or the self as a 'by-product' or an accessory; but it is becoming more and more essential to regard them—the developed finite mind—as 'on the top' of a great deal that must go before it. Two opposing contentions seem to demand fusion. It must be admitted to the voluntarist that a vast underground work is involved in the formation of an intelligent moral being. The conscious self is surely the last word of an immense evolution which is practically and relatively from unconsciousness to consciousness; and presupposes, necessarily presupposes so far as we can understand, the co-operation of unconscious nature in moulding the foundation of mind. I see no logical value whatever in assuming the presence of mind in simpler forms at earlier phases. But to maintain this is, on the other hand, to enhance and not to minimize the power and significance of intelligence, which comes as the climax and revelation when the underground self emerges into relative completeness. Only, when clear consciousness comes, it does not come empty or without presuppositions; it comes in possession of a content and a mechanism which its world has prepared for it. This does not make it a less significant but a more significant utterance of the real, if we look at the matter rightly. Yet, we must understand that bare consciousness and the bare power of selection are nothing, and account for nothing.

The similarity between the net result of these ideas, and the deepest conclusions of religious philosophy, cannot fail to attract our attention. That on the whole the finite intelligent being has the duty and position rather of coming to himself and awakening to his own nature and his unity with what we call, by an imperfect analogy, a greater mind and will, than in controlling the course of the universe or moulding it as an independent cause—this is a point of view which seems to demand reaffirmation. At least it is suggestive as against claims which largely spring from making absolute the attitude of individualistic moralism, and has, I think, been divined with a Spinozistic enthusiasm, though not adequately expressed, by some of the scientific leaders whose inadequate mechanical theory is the legitimate prey of recent philosophical criticism.

BD 541 .B7 1906 IMS
Bosanquet, Bernard,
The meaning of teleology
47091182

PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE
OF MEDIAEVAL STUDIES
59 QUEEN'S PARK
TORONTO 5, CANADA